

In the United States Court of Federal Claims
OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS
No. 21-1989V

KARYN MASON-CHAVEZ,

Petitioner,

v.

SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES,

Respondent.

Chief Special Master Corcoran

Filed: January 30, 2024

David John Carney, Green & Schafle LLC, Philadelphia, PA, for Petitioner.

Austin Joel Egan, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, for Respondent.

DECISION ON ATTORNEY'S FEES AND COSTS¹

On October 8, 2021, Karyn Mason-Chavez filed a petition for compensation under the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, 42 U.S.C. §300aa-10, *et seq.*² (the “Vaccine Act”). Petitioner alleged that she suffered a shoulder injury related to vaccine administration resulting from a tetanus diphtheria acellular pertussis vaccine administered in her left arm on September 30, 2020. Petition, ECF No. 1. On October 18, 2023, I issued a decision awarding compensation to Petitioner based on the Respondent’s proffer. ECF No. 33.

¹ Because this Decision contains a reasoned explanation for the action taken in this case, it must be made publicly accessible and will be posted on the United States Court of Federal Claims’ website, and/or at <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/uscourts/national/cofc>, in accordance with the E-Government Act of 2002. 44 U.S.C. § 3501 note (2018) (Federal Management and Promotion of Electronic Government Services). **This means the Decision will be available to anyone with access to the internet.** In accordance with Vaccine Rule 18(b), Petitioner has 14 days to identify and move to redact medical or other information, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy. If, upon review, I agree that the identified material fits within this definition, I will redact such material from public access.

² National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-660, 100 Stat. 3755. Hereinafter, for ease of citation, all section references to the Vaccine Act will be to the pertinent subparagraph of 42 U.S.C. § 300aa (2018).

Petitioner has now filed a motion for attorney's fees and costs, requesting an award of \$31,434.26 (representing \$29,853.00 in fees plus \$1,581.26 in costs). Petitioner's Application for Fees and Costs ("Motion") filed Oct. 24, 2023, ECF No. 37. In accordance with General Order No. 9, Petitioner filed a signed statement representing that Petitioner incurred no out-of-pocket expenses. *Id.* at 34.

Respondent reacted to the motion on Nov. 14, 2023, reporting that he is satisfied that the statutory requirements for an award of attorney's fees and costs are met in this case, but deferring resolution of the amount to be awarded to my discretion. Respondent's Response to Motion at 2-3, ECF No. 38. Petitioner did not file a reply thereafter.

Having considered the motion along with the invoices and other proof filed in connection, I find reductions in the amount of fees and costs to be awarded appropriate, for the reasons set forth below.

ANALYSIS

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs. Section 15(e). Counsel must submit fee requests that include contemporaneous and specific billing records indicating the service performed, the number of hours expended on the service, and the name of the person performing the service. See *Savin v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 85 Fed. Cl. 313, 316-18 (2008). Counsel should not include in their fee requests hours that are "excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary." *Saxton v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 3 F.3d 1517, 1521 (Fed. Cir. 1993) (quoting *Hensley v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424, 434 (1983)). It is "well within the special master's discretion to reduce the hours to a number that, in [her] experience and judgment, [is] reasonable for the work done." *Id.* at 1522. Furthermore, the special master may reduce a fee request *sua sponte*, apart from objections raised by respondent and without providing a petitioner notice and opportunity to respond. See *Sabella v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 86 Fed. Cl. 201, 209 (2009). A special master need not engage in a line-by-line analysis of petitioner's fee application when reducing fees. *Broekelschen v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 102 Fed. Cl. 719, 729 (2011).

The petitioner "bears the burden of establishing the hours expended, the rates charged, and the expenses incurred." *Wasson v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 24 Cl. Ct. 482, 484 (1991). The Petitioner "should present adequate proof [of the attorney's fees and costs sought] at the time of the submission." *Wasson*, 24 Cl. Ct. at 484 n.1. Petitioner's counsel "should make a good faith effort to exclude from a fee request hours that are excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary, just as a lawyer in private

practice ethically is obligated to exclude such hours from his fee submission." *Hensley*, 461 U.S. at 434.

ATTORNEY FEES

A. Hourly Rates

Petitioner requests hourly rates for attorneys and paralegals performing work in this matter as follows:

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
David J. Carney, Esq.	X	\$350	\$375	\$400	\$425
Paralegals	\$145	\$145	\$145	\$145	\$175
Evan R. Baker, Law Clerk	X	X	\$175	\$185	X

The hourly rates requested for Mr. Carney and paralegals for all time billed in the 2019-23 period are reasonable and consistent with prior determinations and shall therefore be awarded herein. The 2021 and 2022 hourly rates requested for Ms. Baker, however, requires adjustment.

Categorized as a law clerk, Evan Baker was a law student who began working at the firm during the summer of 2021. ECF No. 37 at 9. She has remained at the firm, expecting to take the bar exam in July 2023, after earning her degree. *Id.* However, the hourly rate for her 2021 and 2022 work exceeds the student hourly rate paid in other cases - \$150 and \$165, for years 2021 and 2022, respectively. *E.g., Wnuk v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-0679V, 2023 WL 4195520, at *2 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. May 26, 2023). Accordingly, I shall instead compensate Evan Baker's 2021 and 2022 work at the rates of \$150 and \$165 per hour. This reduces the amount of fees to be awarded by **\$782.00.**³

Additionally, a few of the tasks performed by Mr. Carney are more properly billed using a paralegal rate.⁴ "Tasks that can be completed by a paralegal or a legal assistant should not be billed at an attorney's rate." *Riggins v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 99-382V, 2009 WL 3319818, at *21 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. June 15, 2009). "[T]he rate at

³ This amount consists of $((\$175 - \$150) \times 18.4 \text{ hrs.}) + ((\$185 - \$165) \times 16.1 \text{ hrs.}) = \$25 \times 18.4 \text{ hrs.} + \$20 \times 16.1 \text{ hrs.} = \$782.00.$

⁴ These entries describing the preparation of a notice of filing, the bates stamping medical records, and filing both documents are dated as follows: 10/20/2021 and 9/20/2023. ECF No. 37 at 16, 20.

which such work is compensated turns not on who ultimately performed the task but instead turns on the nature of the task performed.” *Doe/11 v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. XX-XXXXV, 2010 WL 529425, at *9 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Jan. 29, 2010). This reduces the amount of fees to be awarded by **\$284.00**.⁵

B. Billed Hours

Regarding the number of hours billed, I find the amount to be reasonable. Thus, no further reduction in attorney’s fees is needed.

ATTORNEY COSTS

Petitioner requests \$1,581.26 in overall costs. ECF No. 37 at 26. I find the majority of these costs reasonable with the exception of \$87.45 in costs incurred for “[s]canning charges for medical records, letters, intake materials, client documents for case processing.” *Id.* at 33. Such overhead expenses are inherent in operating a law firm and are thus not compensable. Accordingly, the attorney’s costs are reduced by **\$87.45**.

CONCLUSION

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney’s fees and costs for successful claimants. Section 15(e). Accordingly, I hereby GRANT Petitioner’s Motion for attorney’s fees and costs. I award a total of **\$30,280.81 (representing \$28,787.00 in fees plus \$1,493.81 in costs) as a lump sum in the form of a check jointly payable to Petitioner and Petitioner’s counsel, David J. Carney.** In the absence of a timely-filed motion for review (see Appendix B to the Rules of the Court), the Clerk of Court shall enter judgment in accordance with this Decision.⁶

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/Brian H. Corcoran

Brian H. Corcoran

Chief Special Master

⁵ This amount consists of $(\$375 - \$145) \times .8 \text{ hrs.} + (\$425 - \$175) \times .4 \text{ hrs.} = \284.00 .

⁶ Pursuant to Vaccine Rule 11(a), the parties may expedite entry of judgment by filing a joint notice renouncing their right to seek review.